

Keynotes from Nick Hiscocks Sermon on 2/8/2020

“Comfort from an all powerful God”

(Please read these notes whilst listening to the sermon audio file.)

Isaiah 40:1-11 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.³ A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” ⁶ A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” ¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

The world could do with some comfort right now. It is hard to find any news that isn't Covid-related, and we long to hear something that will restore, encourage and reassure us.

In **Isaiah ch 40**, God clearly wants his people to have comfort. **How do we get it and how does it come to us?**

Up till now, the book of Isaiah has mostly been about God's people failing to trust him. He has warned them that if they don't trust him, it will lead to trouble. **Isaiah 7:9** summarises these first 39 chapters: 'If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.' **Isaiah 39:6-7** shows us they have not been firm in their faith so judgement is announced:

⁶ Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. ⁷ And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will

father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

Isaiah is announcing that God’s people will be taken off to Babylon, an event which will take place over 100 years in the future. He is writing to prepare the people for that time in exile. Now in **Isaiah 40**, God gives Isaiah a new message – one of hope not judgement:

- It shows them that, although they are in exile, this doesn’t mean God has rejected them forever
- It is a message that will keep them trusting in their God while they are in exile

Being in exile in a foreign land would mean living with people who spoke a different language, worshiped different gods and had very different standards and priorities. It might seem like their own God isn’t as powerful as the other gods and doesn’t care about what’s happening to them. Christians may have this same sense, living in the world as it is today.

We, too, need to be people who continue to trust God as we live through the current difficult times.

V1 speaks of comfort. The Biblical meaning of comfort is ‘with strength’, not the rather pleasant idea we associate with comfort. God is breathing into his people a life-giving strength, not so that they can live a life of ease, but rather so they can live a life of strength that comes from God. This type of comfort is what the exiles (and we) need. Through Isaiah, God gives his people four reasons why they have that comfort.

1. Sin is paid for – (v2)

God speaks to his people like a lover wooing his beloved, despite their constant waywardness:

- Payment for sin has been provided, exactly matching the sin – double means an exact matching doublet.
- Payment has come from the Lord’s hand – it doesn’t come from the pastor, the church or anywhere else.

- a) How is sin paid for? **Isaiah 53** tells of a servant of the Lord on whom the punishment of our iniquities is laid.
- b) Who is this servant? Jesus Christ – in **Luke 2:25** we read of Simeon who is waiting for 'the consolation (literally the comfort) of Israel', When he holds Jesus in his arms, he says to God 'my eyes have seen your salvation' **v30**.

No matter what is happening in our lives, whether we are having an easy time or struggling, the most important backdrop is that our sin is paid for. We might currently be distressed or despairing, because of lockdown (our exile). We might even have to face death, which brings great sadness, but for believers, death is not the end.

The mainstay of our comfort, bringing life giving strength, is that our sin is paid for by Jesus Christ.

2. The glory of God is coming (vv3-5)

These verses describe an enormous civil engineering project, preparing a road on a vast scale ready for the coming of God. His message is not that he's sending help, but the far more comforting message that **he himself is coming to help**. When the exiles do return to Jerusalem, there is disappointment and not much glory to speak of. Returning to the land is not the real end of exile. In the New Testament, we hear the voice of John the Baptist as he prepares the way (the road) for the coming of the Lord Jesus, preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins.

- God comes to the world in Jesus
- The glory of God is seen in Jesus
- God comes into individual lives, as people repent and believe, ending their exile.

Christians do not need to say 'I wish God would come near'.

- If you have repented and believed, he has already come near
- If you haven't repented and believed before, but do so now, he will come near.

Comfort, comfort my people, says God.

The glory of God is coming and has come as we live the other side of the arrival of Jesus.

3. The word of God is lasting (vv6-8)

Isaiah tell us that flowers and trees fade and fail, and people are like that too. They aren't reliable and they don't last, unlike the word of God.

- When he says sin is paid for, it is completely paid for
- When he says I'm going to come to you, he definitely will, however long it seems to take.

The word of God is lasting. No one else is able to offer genuine comfort.

4. The Sovereign God is the shepherd (vv9-11)

Messengers go up on the hills with a big announcement – Behold your God! God is coming and this is what he is like.

The God of Israel rules over everything:

- Big things like the exile and Coronavirus
- Tiny things like the spinning of a spider's web

He is the Sovereign Lord and he is coming in power with his mighty arm, to carry out his salvation plan. He will bring with him his reward (v10). What is his reward? A flock of sheep (v11)!

The Sovereign powerful Lord tends his flock like a shepherd:

- He gathers the lambs in his arms – they can be very weak, cold and vulnerable
- He carries them close to his heart – he's emotionally involved in his people and their care
- He gently leads those who have young – he knows exactly the needs of each one and attends to them with perfect knowledge and individual help.

The Sovereign God is your shepherd – the mighty arm that carries out the salvation plan is also the tender arm that carries the lambs.

Here is your God and here is your comfort.

When life is difficult, we often start to think of God wrongly. We must keep all that the Bible says about him firmly in place. **Vv10-11** give us two seemingly opposing ideas together – the sovereignly powerful God is also the gentle and tender shepherd.

If he is only the **shepherd** God in our thinking then:

- He lacks the power to change anything
- We're at the mercy of every circumstance and God is hamstrung when there's a pandemic across the world.

But he is the **Sovereign** Shepherd – his arm rules for him, and he is working out **his** plan.

If he is only the **Sovereign** God in our thinking then:

- He neither knows nor cares about the detail of our lives
- He is removed from reality, untouched by anything that happens

But he is the Sovereign **Shepherd** – tender and caring enough to be involved.

God's word does indeed stand forever. With the coming of Jesus Christ, God has come in sovereign power and tender care.

- We see his sovereign power in the calming of the storm, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead.
- We see the shepherd's tender care when he lays down his life gladly for sinners.

Here is our comfort, because here is our God

Do you know Jesus as your life-giving strength?

- Jesus Christ is the mighty God whose heart goes out to his cherished people in all their different trials.
- He is the ruler of everything who carries his people close to his heart.

Is Jesus alone your comfort?

- You won't find true comfort in stockpiling food in the current crisis or planning for post lockdown

- Such things might be helpful in small ways but they won't deliver life giving strength and eternal comfort.

Only Jesus Christ can truly be your comfort. In him:

- Sin is paid for
- The glory of God has come
- God's word proves to stand forever
- We see our Sovereign God as the tender shepherd.

Here is your God – the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is your comfort.